

SLSA 2013 Proposal
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Water and the Postnatural City:
Reversals, Invasions, and Prospects for Sustainability

Conference Abstract

It is hard to think of a natural substance more vital to life than water. Yet, "the natural" is difficult to locate amidst the bewildering complex of intakes, filters, screens, pumps, chemical treatment chambers, distribution mains, pipes of all sizes, gutters, storm drains, sinks, sewers, settling tanks, combined sewage overflows, canals, locks, oxygenating waterfalls, electric fish barriers, and myriad other technological accouterments that allow us to convey, control, imbibe, and dispense with freshwater/wastewater in our cities and suburbs. Despite the utter domination of water's movement by what environmental engineers call the "hard path" of water resource management, however, the capacity of even highly degraded urban river corridors to support surprising levels of biodiversity -- not to mention the tendency of urbanized landscapes to flood -- demonstrates that Nature in the form of wild (read: violent) water frequently reasserts its power over us.

This presentation takes a deep dive into the aptly named Chicago Area Waterway System to ask: What does it mean for an urban river to be "postnatural," and why has it been such for so many decades? How does a river suffer from being dredged, straightened, polluted, reversed, flushed, rerouted, industrialized, and biologically invaded since the mid-19th century and then become a locus of urban sustainability and ecological restoration in the 21st century? Finally, what might the salient tropes of various Water and the City narratives teach us about our capacity to explore and apprehend an urbanized but still wild (read: unpredictable) nature in a postnatural age?

Multimedia Requirements

This 15-20 minute presentation will feature a plethora of photographic images, maps, and the occasional stimulating diagram. As such, a computer projector equipped for a MacBook would kindly appreciated.